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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND EASTERN EUROPEAN TRANSITIONS: CONTINUING EFFORTS AND (MUTUAL) ADAPTATION*

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Abstract

Professor Braun's speech at the ceremony granting the title of *Professor Honoris Causa* of the University of Bucharest addressed the struggle of post-totalitarian societies to establish consolidated democracies. While emphasizing his own experience with totalitarian regimes, he also assessed the global state of democracy and human rights.

Keywords: democratization, totalitarian regimes, human rights, collective security, east-west dichotomy.

It is a great honor and pleasure for me to be here in Bucharest and I wish to thank the members of the Senate, the faculty, those who initiated the process and the entire University of Bucharest for this award and invitation.

For someone whose ancestry is in this country, this is an especially meaningful award. Moreover, for a person whose parents had suffered the horrors and ravages of both Nazism and Stalinism it is a special occasion for me to come to a free country, one which despite all the monumental problems of transition has chosen to join the community of democratic states and is now a member of both NATO and the European Union**.**

Democracies, however, do not offer guarantees; they represent only opportunities, and even in the best circumstances involve difficult struggles and adaptation. Further, as I am examining at a vast topic and facing a large canvas, please allow me to paint with a broad brush.

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It is also not my purpose to rekindle any debates between concepts of transition and notions of consolidated democracy. I proceed on the Jeffersonian assumption of democracy as a continuing struggle, where civic engagement remains crucial. As well, I do not especially wish to enmesh myself in a debate between approaches and methodologies, including one which had created a false dichotomy between comparative analysis on the one hand, and area studies on the other, as posited by Philippe C. Schmitter and Karl Terry. And I am not quite persuaded by Valerie Bunce's seeming invitation to have transitologists "grounded". This, of course, is not meant to ignore either the historical past or valiant scholarly attempts at understanding change and direction, but I think it is well worth heeding Winston Churchill's dictum that, "If we open a quarrel between the past and the present, we shall find that we have lost the future".

Yet, in looking at the future, we should also be cognizant of the limitations of social science. As a social scientist, I must admit a great deal of discomfort with the term "science", applied to what we do, for we certainly lack the precision, replicability, control, and predictability that physical sciences largely, if not always, offer. If we need any further invitation to humility, our collective inability in the social sciences and humanities to have predicted the tectonic changes in what was called the "Communist World", barely two decades ago, should be a warning. Some of us, myself included, did indicate the possibility of fundamental change, but we lacked the confidence and courage to be specific and definitive. Humility aside though, my primary purpose here is not a *mea culpa*, but rather to draw lessons and divine trends and possibilities.

I come to this topic and this enormously important region not because I naturally possess some great or special insight, but first as a result of the longevity of academic experience and association. My scholarly background is in international relations, international law, and political science. I have benefited from exceptional academic opportunities and institutional associations. I studied Marxism with one of its leading Western proponents, C.B. MacPherson, and then I had an opportunity to be influenced by one of that belief system's most influential apostates, Leszek Kolakowski. I also studied with Allan Bloom, the author of *The Closing of the American Mind*, a controversial figure, yet one whose elegance of logic and passion for excellence were inspiring. As a visiting scholar at Stanford University twice in the 1980s, I had a chance to associate with: Seymour Martin Lipset, who stressed that it was not just about systems, but also about intuition; Sydney Hook, the renounced philosopher and exponent of "free will", whose modesty and skepticism were touching; Milton Friedman, the Nobel Laureate economist who stressed to me as I was writing on Comecon and the Warsaw Pact, that the primary issues are usually about politics rather than economics; and Robert Conquest, the great historian of Soviet terror, who was able to decipher with amazing accuracy the character of totalitarianism before the KGB archives were opened up, through dogged scholarly

determination and intuition. From these and other scholars, I learned the importance of skepticism when facing “scholarly fashion”, the limits of methodologies, qualitative and quantitative, and the significance of talent and intuition while pursuing rigorous and probative analysis.

Second, I approach the subject also as a practitioner. As head of the International Centre for Human Rights & Democratic Development (Rights & Democracy), in Montreal, I guide an organization whose mandate from the Parliament of Canada is to promote democracy and human rights globally. Though we have a rather small budget of only $13 million per annum, we have a large task, and we are concerned with the fact that, just as we welcome the expansion of freedom and democracy in many parts of the world, we are also witnessing the contraction of the "democratic space" in places, the return of dystopian regimes, and the hijacking of the language of human rights.

Though my starting point, as usual, is International Relations, this is not necessarily the usual IR approach. Regardless of the starting point, my preference is an across-the-disciplines approach, where an understanding of the local is prime. As the late U.S. Speaker of the House, Tip O’Neill, was fond of, and quite right in saying, “All politics is local”. Yet, while domestic factors are prime in many ways, they are certainly not exclusive. We live in a world that is both interconnected and interdependent. Consequently, there is a continuing and complex interaction among domestic and foreign variables, where developments are not necessarily linear, where there are large lacunae, where adaptability is essential, and yet predictability is too often ephemeral.

It is a world where, thanks to cyberspace and social media, information is shared with amazing speed, even in some of the most remote parts of the world, and tyrannies have greater difficulty making themselves opaque. Nonetheless, we should also be keenly aware of how the speed of communication can add to distortion and can readily foster misinformation. Long before the current age, Winston Churchill had colorfully warned that “A lie gets half-way around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on”.

Predicting trends and even possibilities though, as noted, remains exceedingly difficult. “Futurology” is an aspiration rather than reality, and Herman Kahn and Bertrand de Jouvenel, for instance, largely recognized this. The latter, in fact, wrote about *The Art of Conjecture*. That is, we are looking more at art than science, and it is worth keeping in mind the old Russian proverb, “The past, itself, is unpredictable; who dares predict the future?”. Consequently, what I am attempting here, using a large brush, is an across the disciplines synthesis that speaks to the need for multiple and interactive adaptation that comes in part from the international, but also speaks to the regional and local. Skepticism, here, moreover, as noted, should not be viewed as something to obviate the need for scholarly rigor and probative policy formulation and analysis.

Competing approaches in international relations offer us both possibilities and caveats here. Realism, as the best realist theorists readily admit, has significant limitations (including uncertainty and volatility), but it has the benefit of enormous longevity. As we all know, we can go back more than two millennia and read with great benefit the Greek historian Thucydides', *History of the Peloponnesian Wars*, the Chinese author Sun Tzu's classic, *The Art of War*, or the Hindu statesman and philosopher Kautilya's many works, as well as learn from modern writers such as Hans Morgenthau, Raymond Aron and Henry Kissinger, among others. Structural realists, such as Kenneth Waltz, have tried to "fix" the classical realists' emphasis on the fearful and conflictual nature of humankind, by focusing on the structure of the international system to account for the behavior of states. The emphasis of structural realism (or neo-realism) on the most powerful states and the distribution of power among them, unfortunately though, created more rigidity than light and misunderstood the profoundness of power and its many dimensions that the realists saw in the full, including the essential factors of culture, morale, and diplomacy.

Liberalism offers an alternative to realism, as we know, with an emphasis more on cooperation than conflict, and a prescription for coordination. The proposal to overcome the inherent anarchy and violence of the international system through carefully designed institutions for international cooperation, is certainly commendable. One may very well appreciate Liberalism's rejection of the idea that world is driven by a zero-sum game, where one state's gain translates into another's loss. Its view of world politics as a variable-sum game seems preferable, for we would like to believe that we should be able to create a system where all states simultaneously and mutually benefit through cooperation, both at the regional and at the international levels.

The United Nations has been both the epitome and the central expression of the institutional/cooperative approach. Its foundational principle of collective security, predicated on the power of moral suasion, collective commitment to peace, rejection of aggression, and emphasis on human rights and equality, represent a signal opportunity in human history. The organization, however, has also sadly become the poster child of the massive failure of much of the institutional approach in international relations. An extraordinarily large and massively expensive institution, the UN has indeed performed some good in certain functional areas. It has failed though, I would argue, in terms of its central predicates.

Just think, the General Assembly (GA) Presidency is currently in the hands of Qatar, a corrupt dictatorship. That same office in 2009, we should recall, was held by Libya, then led by Moammar Gadhafi, in charge of a regime whose horrors made Qatar look like an enlightened liberal democracy by comparison. Iran, whose oppressive and genocidal regime openly calls for the destruction for a fellow UN member, currently holds one of the (GA)Vice

Presidencies. In fact, Iran has also been put in charge of one of the committees, specifically on women's rights, which is akin to appointing mass murderer Charles Manson as head of a committee to rehabilitate psychopaths. Lest we forget, if I may remind you, the UN Human Rights Council, which has among its members some of the most oppressive regimes in the world, in May 2010, witnessed the election of Libya as a member, with over 150 countries voting for the inclusion of the Gadhafi regime to this august body. Many of these states, in an Orwellian fashion, warmly praised the Libyan leader's "impressive commitment to human rights". Sadly, then, the UN, this ultimate institutional global "aegis', has deteriorated into a kind of "theater of the absurd" characterized by endless distorted resolutions, an institution that may be better explained by the great, late Romanian playwright and satirist, Eugène Ionesco, than by international relations specialists or political scientists.

There are additional international relations approaches. Rejecting many of the rationalist and materialist ideas of the modern era as developed in the XIXth and XXth centuries, critical theory, which regards world politics as a process of identity formation and discourse on many levels (rather than conflict and cooperation), has given rise to post-modernism, among which is *constructivism*. One can appreciate the attraction of constructivism, for it seems to give voice to variables that, at times, appear to be unrepresented, such as culture, class, race, and gender. Moreover, constructivism may appeal to certain intellectual sectors by emphasizing discursive practices and the ideational motor, while holding truth as socially constructed (that is, subjective), rather than objective. Decoding value-laden language and flirting with the borders of situational ethics, however, is problematic, for in a sense, there is a subjective multiplier to the "subjective" that can easily distort perception and analysis. Constructivism, with some exceptions, also misunderstands classical realism, where culture and identity are also important. And, although better discursive practices would be a boon to international and regional relations, as in the case of Eastern Europe, constructivism fails to successfully address the pivotal "security dilemma" that states continually confront.

Where does all of this leave us? Each of the above approaches has some particular value, but it seems that liberal institutionalism and post-modernist theories, such as constructivism, have delivered even less of what they promise than the others, imperfect as those may be. Consequently, the scholar, or the student of international relations, putting himself in the position of the policy-maker, may find that certain complex theoretical formulations have a vastly more difficult meld with practice than realism, for example.

Some combinations though, do offer promise, including democratic peace theory. I would suggest that it is especially relevant to Eastern Europe (not a simply homogenous region) in the XXIst century. Again, it is an imperfect approach, with its own pitfalls, and limited to a particular grouping of states.

Rooted in Kantian theory (*Perpetual Peace*) and viewed through a modern iteration by Michael Doyle, for instance, it combines domestic variables (democracy, and more specifically, democratic constraint) with foreign variables that govern international behavior. The peaceful character of interaction, however, is restricted to relations among democracies (and here, definition is important). This is also crucial for the states of Eastern Europe in terms of peace and domestic and international adaptation. Geography is immutable; politics, however, are not. It is worrisome, then, that some states "east" of Eastern Europe may be drifting in a different direction than democracy, making the melding of theory and practice even more difficult.

Nonetheless, the need for adaptation, domestically, regionally and internationally, remains. Moreover, adaptation functions along a continuum that, for the success of democracies, also has to pivot on key principles. Hence, we need the art of the balance.

How do we then go forth in such an interactive international system? First, without getting into a debate of what is consolidated democracy, both new and older democracies need to protect and continue to nurture democratic principles and processes, in order to preserve the legitimacy of the political order. Without that legitimacy, it is ultimately extraordinarily difficult, if not entirely impossible, in the longer term to deal with the economic, social and international problems that all states confront.

Second, despite the current difficult economic times, it is essential to minimize economic volatility, ensure long term growth through entrepreneurship, innovation and enhanced productivity, not only to preserve domestic social peace and satisfy key needs for equity, but also to become more effective participants in an intertwined international economic system.

Third, states need to resist the seduction of collective security, which pending a fundamental, systemic transformation of the political world, is yet to achieve its central goals and deal effectively with the expensive but necessary drudgery of collective defense. In short, adaptation, particularly in Eastern Europe, cannot mean, at least for the foreseeable future, the forgoing of hard security guarantees, in exchange for the inspiring but yet unattainable promise of international legality and moral suasion.

Fourth, Eastern Europe’s integration with the other half of the continent, after a long, tragic and unnatural separation, should not lead to isolation from the transatlantic partners, the U.S. and Canada. Both in terms of security and culture, this would be a mistake.

Fifth, the North American partners, in turn, can ill afford to allow the isolation and neglect of Eastern Europe. Such actions in the past have proved to be extremely deleterious to international peace, and the North American partners need to resist isolationist instincts as part of *their* adaptation to the needs of the XXIst century.

The above are difficult tasks, both costly and unpredictable. Yet, I remain profoundly optimistic because of the perspective of the past two decades. Extraordinary transformation has taken place, and we see flickers of similar developments in many other parts of the world. As difficult as the road may be, the alternatives are far more costly and dangerous. Though again, we are going through difficult times, there are nevertheless enormous opportunities for progress and adaptation. It can be done together, I believe, within the community of democracies, one that should continue to enlarge. It is a multidimensional, interactive approach, melding theory and practice, resting on scholarship, statesmanship and partnership.

Thank you again.